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ANDERSON COOPER: Here's another number for you, 230 years. That is the sentence that Democratic Congressman William Jefferson of New Orleans could draw if convicted of all 16 federal counts, federal charges against him, corruption charges.

Remember him? Ninety thousand dollars was found in his freezer in \$10,000 bundles camouflaged in frozen food packaging? Well, today, his colleagues voted to speed up the investigation that could make him an ex-congressman, but -- get this -- not without a fight, one that included allegations of Republican hypocrisy and questions about whether Democrats really meant what they said when they promised to clean up Washington.

CNN's Joe Johns tonight is "Keeping Them Honest."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JOE JOHNS, CNN CONGRESSIONAL CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): A day after Bill Jefferson was indicted for bribery, freshman Democrats who ran against the so-called culture of corruption are fit to be tied.

REP. NANCY BOYDA (D), KANSAS: Did we mean it last November when we said we would change Congress, or were our words just mere election-year slogans?

JOHNS: Republicans, who took a beating in the midterm elections because of congressmen on the take, are glad to have a Democrat on the rack.

REP. JOHN BOEHNER (R-OH), HOUSE MINORITY LEADER: The Ethics Committee should reignite its investigation of Mr. Jefferson, find out whether he's violated rules of the House --

that's different than whether he violated laws -- and then, in fact, hold him accountable.

JOHNS: So, it seems pretty simple, right? Indictment equals expulsion. Don't count on it. Why? Because Jefferson hasn't been convicted of anything. He hasn't admitted anything either. He says he's not guilty. And it looks like he's digging in to fight.

Jefferson has even hired Monica Lewinsky's public-relations rep, Judy Smith, to help out with the message. And, anyway, it takes a two-thirds-majority vote to expel a member of the House. And Jefferson still has people who are quietly saying, don't rush to judgment.

Josephine Hearn covers the House for Politico.com.

JOSEPHINE HEARN, STAFF REPORTER, "THE POLITICO": There are people who are defending Bill Jefferson right now. There are some members of the Black Caucus. There are some members who are not in the Black Caucus. They're simply just good friends of Mr. Jefferson, or feel that we can't set a precedent here of expelling a member before they have actually been found guilty of something.

JOHNS (on camera): So, you, as the taxpayer, will keep paying Jefferson's salary as long as he stays in the House. And, as it stands now, when he leaves the House, taxpayers will pay his pension, too, even if he's convicted or pleads guilty and goes to jail. Shocking as it sounds, former members of Congress are cashing in from the big house.

REP. MARK KIRK (R), ILLINOIS: Last month, several former members of Congress cashed in their taxpayer-funded retirement checks from jail. After indictment and conviction beyond a shadow of a doubt, they are still paid each month by the taxpayers they betrayed.

JOHNS (voice-over): There is legislation to change that, but it's still a long way from final passage. So, for now, crime still pays, at least in the U.S. Congress.

Joe Johns, CNN, Washington.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Not only does it pay; it continues to pay.

Until that changes, you're paying for William Jefferson, if he's convicted, and a whole rogues' gallery of crooked congressmen. We picked up on this story back in January. For months, lawmakers have been promising to do something about it. We have been trying to hold them to their word. CNN's Drew Griffin tonight also "Keeping Them Honest."

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DREW GRIFFIN, CNN INVESTIGATIVE CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Every single one of these former members of Congress either pleaded guilty to or was convicted of at least one serious crime. Yet, every one of them is estimated to be receiving that dollar amount next to their picture every year, their congressional pension based on their years in office, you, the taxpayers, paying the pension of crooks.

(on camera): Even if they take you out of Washington in handcuffs and throw you in prison, Congress still gets its pension.

(voice-over): Case in point, Randall "Duke" Cunningham -- he pleaded guilty to using his congressional office to accept bribes, kickbacks, money from the contractors he was voting to give government business.

Cunningham right now is sitting in this federal prison in North Carolina, and getting his government pension, an estimated \$64,000 a year, sent to a congressional felon sitting in the can.

JOHN BERTHOUD, NATIONAL TAXPAYERS UNION: Cunningham has to be the classic example.

GRIFFIN: John Berthoud is president of the National Taxpayers Union. It's a watchdog lobbying group, mostly interested in cutting the size of government, cutting waste and cutting taxes.

Because federal pensions are secret, all of the figures you have seen in this report are estimates based on the Taxpayers Union's calculations. Berthoud can think of no better example of government waste than sending \$64,000 a year to Duke Cunningham.

BERTHOUD: But all of us are still paying this guy \$64,000 a year, roughly, while he sits in prison. And, you know, I think the vast majority of Americans think that that is really, really wrong.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Congressman, what are you going to tell the judge today?

GRIFFIN: And Cunningham is hardly alone.

JAMES TRAFICANT, FORMER U.S. CONGRESSMAN: I'm not going to admit to crimes I did not do.

GRIFFIN: James Traficant, the Ohio congressman convicted of bribery and sentenced to eight years, is collecting an estimated \$40,000 a year sitting in this federal prison in Minnesota.

Traficant and Cunningham didn't respond to our letters, and former Minnesota Congressman Dave Durenberger didn't want to talk to us either.

DAVE DURENBERGER, FORMER U.S. CONGRESSMAN: The Department of Justice has charged me...

GRIFFIN: He pleaded guilty to fraud in 1995, did a year's probation, and paid a fine. Now we pay him an estimated pension of \$86,000 a year.

(on camera): And who among the convicted felons of Congress is getting the most out of his retirement? That would be the guy who lives in this Chicago building and owns this car. Take a look at the license plate, retired member of Congress. That big "R" stands for the big guy, Chairman Daniel Rostenkowski, usually not shy about talking to the media, except when it comes to his estimated \$126,000- a-year taxpayer funded pension.

(voice-over): The former chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee told us on the phone he has nothing to say. And, in fact, Rostenkowski, who was sent to prison for mail fraud, may have good reason not to answer his door.

Just a month ago, the state of Illinois used its felony conviction clause to take away the pension of former Governor George Ryan, who was convicted and sentenced to six-and-a-half years for mail fraud, money laundering, and extortion. But that's state law.

Under federal law, the only grounds for stripping a congressman of his pension is if he's convicted of treason. The National Taxpayers Union for years has been calling for a tougher conviction clause, a simple change says Taxpayers Union president Berthoud: If you are convicted of any felony while in office, you forfeit your right to get paid.

BERTHOUD: It's hard, unless maybe you're a member of Congress or a former member of Congress, for anybody to understand how on earth you could ask taxpayers to pay pensions for people like that.

GRIFFIN: Now two dozen watchdog groups have joined the campaign, sending this letter to the incoming Democrats who vowed to drain the swamp, asking them to at least drain the felons from the swamp.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: CNN's Drew Griffin looking out for your money tonight.